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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines reasons for the apparent discrepancy between public- and private-school cost per student. The paper compares one public and one private school system in Palm Beach, Florida--Palm Beach County Schools and Lake Worth Christian Schools. It argues that public schools are more expensive because of the many categories of student populations that are eligible for special financial assistance. The following variables that affect public schools are also discussed: building and capital expenditures; foreign-language students; vocational-technical schools and equipment; an unstable public school population; transportation costs; dropout-prevention programs, and other indirect costs. Recommendations to make public-school finance more cost-effective include: (1) reduce the size of larger school districts; (2) return financing and buildings to the local government structure; (3) implement testing/grading procedures based on cognitive profiles, learning-style inventories, and mastery learning; (4) establish a moral/ethical vision; and (5) implement an individualized approach to teaching and learning. (LMI)

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Is it Fair to Compare Public and Private School Financing?

The discrepancy between the performance of private schools and their public school counterparts is growing daily. But why is this? Is it the selectivity of the student population? The religious approach and philosophy which is predominately Judeo-Christian? Or is it simply the management of the available resources that each have at their disposal?

The facts that private school students preform better on any form of standardized assessment is undisputable. The evidence is so overwhelming, even when all variables are taken into consideration such as family income, education, and race, that space will not be spent on reconfirming the obvious. Rather what will be done, is to try to give a comparison of the major financial variables that affect the education of full-time equivalent students for both a public school system and a private Christian school. Since the authors of this article both live in Palm Beach County, Florida, the Palm Beach County Schools and Lake Worth Christian Schools were used for comparison purposes. Almost any other private and public school system in Florida could be cited for most do not vary by more than ten percent in total money expended per student over a fiscal year.

Before such areas as fixed cost, capital projects/debt service, and equipment expenditures can be rationally discussed,

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the whole public school system of special student categories needs to be revisited. Over the years special interest groups, state and local bureaucrats, and Federal mandates have created dozens of categories. In Palm Beach County Schools, and this would hold true for any county in Florida, there are some forty-nine (49) categories of students, and a cost factor that is applied depending on which category a student is placed. These categories give a factor or 1.000 for basic programs to students in Grades 4,5,6,7, and 8 only. These factors accelerate to a high of 13.946 for exceptional student programs. This means some students are worth fourteen times as much money to the system as other students.

Herein lies a major reason why a public school education can cost so much more than private education. It literally pays the public system to categorize as many students as possible in any program other than basic or mainstream. Instead of learning differently, students are labeled as learning disabled, educable mentally handicapped, training mentally handicapped, emotionally handicapped, at risk or in the dropout prevention program, vocational, or some other such category. Not that there isn't a fraction of the student population that deserves such special assistance, equivalent to the general population of our communities, but it surely does not apply to the percentages getting such designations.

The latest "at risk" guidelines would qualify most teachers themselves as it relates to family income, education, and marital

status category. Private schools also have special education classrooms and often charge up to twice, not fourteen times, the tuition rate of a non-handicapped student. It's time to revisit this classification schema, or bounty system, and only give those students who are truly handicapped a double portion of revenues. If a student can't be educated with twice the resources as a regular/basic student than a community's other human service agencies need to be brought into the overall educational picture with the school system assuming only the "basic" education role. For our discussion a full-time equivalent student is one F.T.E.

By taking the total FTEs and dividing it by the total expenditures of a school system, one can see the average expenditure per student. But this figure does not reveal cost already usurped by the State Department of Education. Neither would it show the Federal administrative costs which are incurred prior to that money reaching the state or local educational agencies. Nor would trust or private giving (e.g. foundations) be shown for either the public or private school system. In other words, the figures are even higher, especially for public schools, than the figures per student reported here. Using data from Palm Beach Community Schools and Lake Worth Christian Schools, the FTE expenditure per student is $9,800 and $4,000 respectively.

On the surface it appears that the public school spends 2.5 times as much money on one full-time equivalent student as does a

private school. By adding the federal pass through cost and state department cost per student, the difference would be closer to three times the cost to educate a public versus a private school student. One can not jump to the conclusion that schooling should be private and that the education voucher idea is a great concept. First one must examine some of the variables that public schools must deal with that private schools, for the most part, do not. Although space does not allow all factors to be discussed in detail, those which must be considered are briefly reviewed.

Variable # 1 - Building and Capital Expenditures

Yes, both systems (public and private) use approximately the same amount of classroom and support space per student, but they secure them differently. While the publics uses bonds, millage, and special state allocations, the privates typically uses capital campaigns and other fund raising methods. Once buildings are built and construction debts are paid, the cost for keeping the facilities running are close to equivalent. Therefore, a credit must be granted the public schools system for capital cost, even though the privates raised the same expenditures from their students' parents and other benefactors. However, Lake Worth Christian also includes a portion in their budget for building and capital expansion. This amounts to $334 per student.

Not all districts are growing, but in south Florida growth and

new buildings are typically the case, and for discussion purposes, the FY 1993 figures from Palm Beach Community Schools for capital expenditure and debt service are therefore withdrawn from the total budget, thus reducing the cost per student by $3,117.

Variable #2 - Foreign Language Students

The growing population of students whose native language is not English is an additional burden upon the public schools. Although private schools also deal with this population, it is on a much smaller rate than the public schools where some buildings can have as much as fifty percent of its population using a different native language. If there are enough students of one non-English language, then hiring a bi-lingual teacher with that second language skill for self contained classrooms, makes economic sense. On the secondary level, having designated sections with bilingual teachers, also can facilitate the development of the student's full use of the English language.

Also at the secondary level, students who are sixteen years or older can attend, with their parents, the ESOL training offered at the local community colleges who often have a branch close to their home. Since the cost of a regular classroom teacher remains the same, irrespective of their language abilities, the justification for an off-setting cost factor seems hard to justify. The use of

consumable bi-lingual materials is the obvious exception. Reluctantly we give the public schools this ESOL exception which equates to $89 per student.

Variable #3 - Vocational/Technical Schools and Equipment

Here is an area that the public schools attempt to serve but the privates admittedly do not. For the Palm Beach County Schools the FY 1993 budget indicated a vocational education, instructional program line item of $31,727,234. This vocational expenditure equates to $276 for every student attending district schools.

What really needs to be instituted in both the private and public schools is a K-12 career development program and not a specific career skills program where training typically occurs outside of the real community context. Every student should be exposed to career appreciation, exploration, and decision making processes while passing through the K-12 system. They should be able to understand their interests, strengths, abilities, and to explore and match these qualities with as many career clusters as feasibly possible.

Apprenticeships, professional shadowing, cooperative education, as well as related academic experiences, must replace tracking of select, usually non college-bound students. No student

should graduate without a saleable skill and an appreciation of a how to advance in the career cluster area(s) of his/her choice. Specific career training is best left to cooperative ventures with participating community colleges, private business schools, the trades, and universities.

Variable #4 - The Instability of the Public School Population

This is another of those areas that the public schools suffer under more than the private schools. Unlike the public school, there is usually a waiting list to enroll one's child in a private school. Tales of parents camping out over night or waiting in long lines to register their students are not uncommon. Once the proper amount of students per class is reached, the private school can simply say their is no more room. Public school, by state law, must take any student even if he is only there for one day.

With a mobile society a normal student turnover rate is a factor that simply must be considered. Membership enrollment counts and calculations do not consider this variable close enough to be fair to most public schools. But the current pack-them-deep-and-teach-them-cheap class and grade model for learning can absorb extra students while building and instructional costs remain relatively stable. For example, to teach a room of twenty students has about the same cost factor as a room with thirty or even forty students. The overall cost differential is minimum, and for this

reason alone, many systems have stayed with the dysfunctional classroom model for it is easy to administer and appears to be less expensive. Although some costs are incurred by an unstable student population, this variable can not be factored in given the class-and-grade structure employed by schools.

Variable #5 - Transportation Cost

Private schools typically do not provide bus transportation for regular school activities or for desegregation purposes that typically enter into the public schools' cost per pupil. Family transportation or a special charge is the usual response chosen by private schools. However, Lake Worth Christian does include a transportation option chosen by some of the parents at a cost of $204 per student. While public schools would be better served by the use of public transportation, or bidding out to the free enterprise system to reduce cost, most choose to maintain their own transportation system. This cost for the Palm Beach County system amounts to $68 per students using FY 1993 figures.

Variable #6 - Dropout Prevention Programs

Being able to select which students attend one's school gives the private schools a great advantage. This is somewhat analogous

to private colleges who choose only those individuals who not only meet academic qualifications but also personal qualities the educational system is looking for. Although private schools do deal with discipline problems and drop out concerns, it is nothing in comparison to the public schools. Public schools have specific programs in place including alternative education, counseling, and special assistance services to reduce the dropout problem that the privates do not have to deal with. These programs equate to $106 per student in the Palm Beach County system.

Variable #7 - Other Indirect Cost

Although there are no other big line items that can be logically eliminated in favor of the public school sector, with the exception of a relatively small percentage of the exceptional student education programs, we readily admit there are other costs that the public schools have. The required state and federal government's social engineering efforts have resulted in such mandated programs as; Drug Education, Sex Education, Multiculturalism, Day Care, Self-Esteem Training, Conflict Resolution instruction, Alternative Lifestyles Education, to name a few. Although these are not large, line-item expenditures, they do take some funds, and more importantly eat up variable instructional time. For purposes of discussion we are lumping all of these and other incidentals into one indirect cost category and

allowing a $100 per student cost.

In Conclusion

Although these calculations are based on one county public school system and one private school example they do point to some major financial disparities between these alternative forms of education. Totaling all of the allowable deductions we could justify for the public schools there remains a $2,582 difference, i.e. $6,044 for the public versus $3,462 for the private. This figure does not include state and federal departments of education costs which are an additional "public" expenditure per student. The question becomes, where is the $2,582 of extra public school money going? Much of that difference goes toward the higher base salary paid to public school teachers. We believe that all teachers are underpaid and especially so the private school teacher. While we do not support the public schools awarding of base salary increments for advanced degrees, irrespective if they are in the teachers discipline or not, we do support rewarding exemplary teaching wherever it is found.

Public school consolidation was promoted with the rationale that it would make education more cost effective and result in better academic performance. None of these things have happened with any significance. Indeed, it appears it takes twice as much

money to get less academic results. Like most bureaucracies, public schools grow larger, become more expensive, and less responsive to change. The collective size of the system weighs itself down to a point of inefficiency. Soon the administrative structure becomes the reason for existence and not the customers--students, parents, community members. Teaching and learning become secondary to management, administration, protecting one's specialty, and keeping one's job.

The graded system of education, based on such behavioralists as Pavlow, Skinner, and Bloom, was founded under the misconception that complex types of behavior are based on more simple kinds of behavior that can be taught in chunks, bits, or "units" of instruction. Thus the growth of the standardized test and text, time and effort models, and the repetitive approaches to instruction became dominant. We have inherited and continue to perpetuate the step-by-step assembly line design of education. The public schools are the epitome of that philosophy and model.
One reflection of this approach is the over 10,000 programmed computer software "learning" packages that in essence say most people do not learn any differently than do pigeons, rats, and lizards. The administrative reflections of this small animal conditioning theory of learning has resulted in the "accountability" movement's major thrust of test and measurements. Therefore, the desire to standardize textbooks, workbooks, and to constantly assess student performance, not mastery, has resulted in

a massive system of testing and measurement. The cost in real money, and more importantly in wasted instructional time, is overwhelming.

In summary, although we have been able to outline an explanation of the apparent financial discrepancy, i.e. cost per student, in public school and private school education we still feel that the public school systems are too large, over staffed, over degreed, over tested, and lack a morale/ethical base. Our recommendations, especially for larger districts, includes reducing the system's size and returning the financing and buildings to their respective communities, i.e the local governmental structure. Creating K-12 school buildings (systems) of 500 to a 1,000 students to bring a sense of community, ownership, and commitment back to public education would be a good start. Bussing would become less of a problem while parent, business, and supportive non-profit involvement would increase. Eliminate all I.Q, SAT, and bell curve type testing/grading in favor of cognitive profiles, learning style inventories, and mastery learning. We also recommend establishing a moral/ethical vision that the local communities can support and instil into the curriculum of the smaller systems.

It is our belief that students' academic performance, sense of identity, self-worth, and moral values would show significant growth under individualized approaches to teaching and learning. The private schools are living proof that better systems for both

academic excellence and personal development are possible. Isn't it time that we admit that the public schools' "improvement" and "reform" movements of the past four decades have failed and that what is needed are cost-effective models of education such as those that already exist in all our communities--the private schools?